

African Spoonbill *Platalea alba* breeding in Bahi Swamp, Tanzania

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Des Spatules d'Afrique *Platalea alba* nichant dans le marais de Bahi, Tanzanie. L'auteur rapporte la découverte de deux colonies de Spatules d'Afrique *Platalea alba* dans le marais de Bahi, au centre de la Tanzanie, au cours d'une reconnaissance aérienne, le 6 juin 2001. Les colonies comprenaient environ 360 et 120 nids respectivement, ce qui constitue un nombre important, vu que les quelques grandes colonies connues, par exemple au Lac Fitri (Tchad) et dans le delta du Niger (Mali), ont été estimées à 300–400 couples. La population totale sur le continent de cette espèce a été estimée par différents auteurs à moins de 10.000 ou à 10.000–25.000 individus; les observations rapportées ici font supposer que le nombre est supérieur à 10.000 individus.

Two colonies of African Spoonbills *Platalea alba* were discovered in the Bahi swamp (06°03'S 35°10'E), 45 km west of Dodoma, central Tanzania, during aerial reconnaissance of four major wetlands, on 6 June 2001, as part of preparatory work for the implementation of the Ramsar Convention. The colonies were spaced only a few kilometres apart and comprised ground-breeding birds in extensive marsh vegetation in the northern part of the swamp.

The colonies comprised c360 and 120 nests respectively, counted from photographs, thus

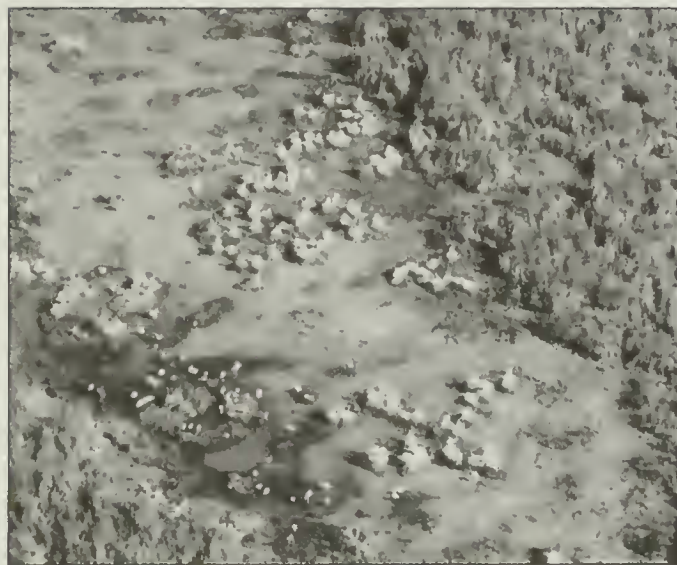


Figure 1. Part of African Spoonbill *Platalea alba* colony, Bahi swamp, central Tanzania, June 2001 (Lars Dinesen)

Partie de colonie de Spatules d'Afrique *Platalea alba*, marais de Bahi, Tanzanie centrale, juin 2001 (Lars Dinesen)



Figure 2. African Spoonbill *Platalea alba* colony, Bahi swamp, central Tanzania, June 2001 (Lars Dinesen)

Colonie de Spatules d'Afrique *Platalea alba*, marais de Bahi, Tanzanie centrale, juin 2001 (Lars Dinesen)

representing a total of c480 pairs. Previously, I estimated from the air that there were approximately 400 and 150 nests in each, illustrating the discrepancies that can be involved in such overflights. Furthermore, c440 spoonbills were estimated in Lake Kitangiri, c240 km to the northwest during the same flight, and nesting may also have occurred at this locality. In the Wembere swamp—part of the same wetland ecosystem—250 pairs bred in 1962¹¹. The Bahi colonies comprise a significant breeding record, because the few other large known colonies have comprised 300–400

pairs, eg in Lake Fitri, Chad and the River Niger, Mali^{1,6,8}.

Most of the Bahi swamp was a lake at the time of the survey. The Bahi depression is a seasonally inundated, semi-permanent internal drainage basin, situated in the Eastern Rift Valley and delimited by the 800 m contour⁹. It is 54 km long by 30 km wide and supports salt-tolerant grasses and some sedges and reeds. The wet season normally ends in late May and at the time of the survey the water table was virtually at its annual maximum.

African Spoonbill is considered generally uncommon and patchily distributed, but it can be locally common, especially in the Rift Valley lakes of Kenya⁵, Tanzania² and western Uganda⁸, and parts of West Africa¹. Approximately 4,200 were counted in the nationwide waterbird count in Tanzania in 1995³ including 2,850 at Lake Eyasi alone⁴.

The internal drainage basins of the Eastern Rift Valley in central and northern Tanzania and Kenya, comprising saline and soda lakes, represent a dynamic network of isolated localities for this semi-nomadic species. It moves in response to seasonal rainfall¹ and probably human interference, eg annual burnings. The total African population was estimated to be fewer than 10,000 or 10,000–25,000 individuals^{1,10}, but the new record contributes to the expectation that the population exceeds 10,000 birds (N E Baker *in litt*) in accordance with the latest review by Dodman⁷, who estimated the population at 10,000–100,000 individuals.

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